

Story 1813 (1969 Tape 9)

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Location: Gümüşdamla village,
Kelkit kaza,
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Date: August 1969

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Unusual Sense of Duty of a Wife

There was once a very rich man living in İstanbul who had just one son. One day after this son was fully grown and mature, the rich man said to the boy's mother "My wife, the time has come for our son to be married. Let us make whatever arrangements are necessary for his marriage. The first thing that we shall have to do is to find a suitable bride. She must, of course, be a girl who is chaste and one who comes from a good family."

"Very well," answered his wife.

Taking his iron walking stick and wearing iron shoes,¹ the rich man began a long search for a suitable girl for their son. He looked not only in İstanbul, but he also visited many villages, sometimes crossing

¹Although no one literally wears iron shoes, such shoes plus an iron walking stick symbolize a very long trip. When one goes on a difficult quest--whether it takes one abroad or to another world-- it is said that before he/she completes his/her trip, he/she must wear out these iron accoutrements.

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mountains to reach them. After he had traveled to many different places, he came upon a tribe whose leader was said to have a fine daughter. As he approached the tribe, he called, "Selamünaleyküm."

"Aleykümselam,"² responded the tribal leader. The leader accepted the stranger as a guest and showed him every hospitality. After they had eaten dinner and had talked with each other at some length, the leader asked, "Oh, my ağa,³ have you come with good news? What has brought you to this part of the country? What are you seeking?"

"Oh, sir, my problem is a very large one."

²Conventional initial greetings between Moslems who are strangers to each other. The terms, respectively, mean, "Peace be with you!" and "And may peace be with you too!"

³An ağa (English, agha) is a rural landowner, sometimes wealthy, often powerful. The word does not indicate an official title but describes an economic status. They are often the principal employers of farm workers, and they are often viewed by their employees as harsh, driving, and abusive. The term ağa is also used in a complimentary way, as an honorific, for a distinguished or just older person than the one using the term. Thus an older brother is called ağa bey by his younger siblings. Ağa bey may be used as a deferential term to one older or more prestigious than the speaker. A taxi driver may refer to his passenger as ağa bey; a salesman speaking to a male customer may call him ağa bey.

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"I hope that nothing is seriously wrong," said the tribal chief. "Every problem in this world has some kind of a solution. But tell me about your problem."

"I have only one child, a son. When we die we do not want our fortune to go to others. We want to have our son married, and we want him to continue our family tradition. I am traveling about looking for a suitable bride for our son, a girl who is chaste and who is the daughter of an honorable family. I have been told that you have such a daughter." He said no more, and he departed for home shortly after that, but before leaving that area, he learned more about the good qualities of the leader's daughter. When he reached home, he said to his wife, "A tribal chief who showed me great hospitality has an only daughter who is reported to be a virtuous girl. I should like to get this girl as a bride for our son, and I am prepared to offer her parents the girl's weight in gold in order to get her."⁴

⁴Even today there are instances in which the parents of the bridegroom offer a substantial gift to the family of the bride. It is the bride's family which bears the heavy expense of the wedding; among these expenses are maintenance costs for scores of relatives and friends who may be guests during several days of wedding celebrations. In some cases the gift may be quite unabashedly a "bride price."

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In the meantime the tribal leader spoke to his own wife about their daughter's future. He said, "My I recently accepted as a guest a wealthy man in search for a suitable girl to become his son's bride. He had been told that we had a chaste daughter who came from a good family and was an honorable girl. You are the only one who knows for certain about this girl's heritage I don't know."

The tribal chief's wife answered, "Allah knows that I never breast-fed my daughter with dirty milk, and I never fed her without first taking ritual ablutions."

/Narrator's comment: "As you know, some women breast-feed even when they are secretly sleeping with someone. Such milk is said to be 'dirty milk' and may affect the character of the infant."7

When the rich man came into the tribal area again, he was met by the tribal chief. That leader said, daughter is the kind of girl you are seeking for your son. You may have her." Since the rich man had hoped for this result, he had brought with him a quantity of gold equal to the weight of the girl. After delivering this gold to the tribal leader, the rich man took the girl to Istanbul.

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There in the presence of both families a wedding celebration was held for seven days and seven nights. After that, the married couple settled down to a comfortable life together.

After many years, both the wealthy merchant and his wife died. Their great fortune was inherited by their son and the daughter of the Türkmen⁵ chief. The son of the merchant now followed in his father's footsteps by becoming a merchant. Every day he went to manage the excellent shops which he had inherited. In the evening he came home and found his home cleaned and his wife sitting before a window embroidering

One day after she had seen her husband off to work, the wife locked the door and began her usual housework. Soon, however, there was a knock on the door, şak! şak! şak! Going to the door, she asked, "Who is it?"

Four women outside answered, "We are the wives of such and such tradesmen. We have come to visit you. Open

⁵This is the first indication that the tribal chief was a Türkmen. Originally known as Oğuz, the Türkmen were the major Turkic tribe which immigrated into Asia Minor in the 11th century. The Türkmen were the ancestors of many of the Turks in Turkey.

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the door!"

daughter-in-law of the Türkmen ağa answered,
"Welcome to you, even though I cannot open the door
without my husband's permission. Leave now but return
again tomorrow."

right," they said.

■ When evening arrived, so did her husband. After
they had eaten dinner, the husband said, "Hanım,⁶ how are
you? What kind of a day did you have?"

"Efendi,⁷ four women came here today and knocked on
our door. I did not open the door, for I did not have
your permission to do so. Was I correct in refusing to
open the door?"

"Yes, you did well," answered her husband. "Who
were those women?"

"They were the wives of such and such tradesmen."

then they are the wives of friends of mine. If

⁶Hanım is roughly equivalent to lady.

⁷Efendi, roughly equivalent to sir, is a term of
respect and was once a mild honorific. As an honorific
efendi has now been devaluated to the point where it is
now applied only to servants and children. Both hanım and
efendi may seem too formal for use within the family, but
in fact they are still often used in that context.

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they come again tomorrow, show them full hospitality."

The next morning the husband went to work at the usual time. Around nine or ten o'clock someone knocked on the front door. The wife opened the door and welcomed inside the four wives who had come the day before. After they had been there for a short while, the oldest of the four guests said to her hostess, "Oh, my beautiful daughter, you must lead a very quiet and dull life here all alone during the day. Poor girl, why do you do that? We all have handsome male friends whom we hide in the evening when it is time for our husbands to come home. But when our husbands go to work in the morning, we enjoy the company of those other men all day long. You seem to live here without such pleasure."

"Dear mother," said the daughter of the tribal chief, "although I am wealthy now, I came from a background of poverty where such things are not known. I cannot do such things, for I have had no one to advise me about them."

"Don't worry about that, my daughter. I have brought you a very lion of a man disguised as a woman. Although all three of my companions may look like women, the one in the center is a handsome man for you."

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The daughter of the tribal leader thanked them and took them to a room upstairs,⁸ where the handsome man took off his female disguise. The hostess showed them hospitality, and she then asked to be excused while she prepared some food for them. Instead of preparing food, however, she dressed herself in the clothes of a Circassian⁹ warrior and strapped a sword at her waist. She then returned and beheaded the three women and the handsome man. Dragging their bodies outside, she threw them into a well in the garden. She carefully wiped and scrubbed all signs of blood from the floor. She then took her usual seat before the window and renewed embroidering.

When her husband came home that evening, he asked, "My wife, how did your day pass? I hope that you showed hospitality to the women who came."

⁸In many Turkish homes the first level is used for livestock and equipment. The living quarters are on the second floor.

⁹A Caucasus tribe formerly allied with Russia. Beginning in the 6th century they were Christians, but in the 17th century, under the influence of the Ottoman Empire, they were Islamicized. Many migrated to Turkey. They are now an ethnic minority throughout Turkey but mainly along the Black Sea coast. They were renowned as fierce fighters.

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"Yes, I did the best I could." But she did not say anything about the way in which she had disposed of her guests.

A few days later, her husband said, "My wife, it is reported that textiles are selling for very good prices in Aleppo. We have a great quantity of textiles that could be sold there if you would give me permission to go there

"My husband, that is something that is entirely up to you

"While I am gone, Mehmet Ağa will provide for your needs. Tell him what supplies you may need, and he will bring them to you."

The husband had a caravan of textiles loaded and set out for Aleppo. The journey was completed without any difficulties. When the caravan arrived in Aleppo, it entered a caravansary, where the camels were unloaded and the textiles stored. The owner of the textiles then hired lodgings for himself in the inn of that caravansary

After he had settled in the inn and rested for a while, the husband decided to pass the time by visiting some of the city's bazaars to see what kinds of merchandise

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they handled. After he had walked about for a while, he came to a street closed off by a canvas curtain. A town crier there was making an announcement: "The most beautiful girl in the world! A thousand liras to see her picture! Ten thousand liras to spend the night with her!"¹⁰

Istanbul merchant thought to himself, "This is where I shall spend all of my goods." He had decided to spend time with the most beautiful girl in the world. He bought a 10,000-lira ticket and went to the place where the woman lived.

There he wanted to embrace her and get into bed with her, but she said, "Stop! You paid 10,000 liras, but you may have wasted it! Let us play chess. If you beat me, you will get your 10,000 liras back, but if I beat you, then you will have to pay an additional 10,000 liras." They started playing chess. When it appeared that the man had a definite advantage to win the game, the woman

¹⁰ Obviously this tale was set at a time when the lira had not been devaluated to 40,000 per one American dollar, its exchange rate today (1995). In 1961 the exchange rate was 9 per dollar, and in much earlier times the lira was a gold coin.

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adjusted her clothing to make one of her breasts readily visible. This took his mind off the game momentarily, but it was long enough to cause him to lose the game. The woman kept repeating this stratagem, taking 10,000 more liras, 10,000 more, 10,000 more.

By morning the man was telegraphing Istanbul, saying, "My wife, textile products are selling very well here. Send more at once!" This continued until all the textiles in his warehouses in Istanbul had been sent to Aleppo.

Finally there came a day when the daughter of the tribal leader called their faithful servant to her. "Come here, Mehmet Ağa, and listen to my directions. My husband may be wasting his goods in Aleppo. Go and prepare two good horses for the trip to Aleppo so that you and I go there and see what is happening."

While Mehmet Ağa was doing this, the daughter of the tribal chief put on her Circassian clothes again her papak.¹¹ She pushed all her hair up into this curly wool hat and strapped her pistol and her sword to her waist. She and Mehmet Ağa then set out for Aleppo

¹¹ A tall Persian cap of lambskin. Its tightly curled hair is known as karakul.

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When they reached an inn at Aleppo, the girl in Circassian disguise said, "Mehmet Ağa, you wait here. I shall take a walk around this part of the city." After a while she too came to the place where a street was blocked off by a canvas curtain. She too heard the town crier's announcement: "The most beautiful girl in the world One thousand liras to see a picture of her! Ten thousand liras to spend the night with her!"

The girl began to wonder about this. She thought, "Hm-m-m. Perhaps my husband was captured by this attraction." This was even more true than she guessed, for her husband was actually a prisoner, with his hands tied, in the basement of the building where the most beautiful girl in the world lived. Dressed as a Circassian warrior the tribal chief's daughter bought a 10,000-lira ticket to spend the night with the world beauty and was given a receipt for it.

That evening the girl dressed as a Circassian warrior went to the home of the most beautiful girl in the world. Actually, the two girls were equally beautiful, but now one seemed to be a man. The world beauty said, "It is my practice not to go to bed with any man until

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after I have played chess with him." She then explained the terms of the game

"Very well," said the other girl in disguise. "I should like to do that too." This Türkmen girl was a very good chess player, and before the game had gone very far, she was beginning to win the game. When the world beauty realized that she might be beaten, she exposed a breast, as she had done before. When the Türkmen girl saw this, she slapped the world beauty very hard and said, "You whore! That is only a way to distract men! Pull yourself together so that we can continue this game!" She continued to beat the world beauty in game after game until she had won back all of the money that her husband had lost as well as the textiles he had lost. These textiles were in storage in the world beauty's house. When they came to the last game, The Türkmen girl said to her opponent, "Inasmuch as you no longer have anything to bet, if you lose this last game, you will forfeit yourself to me." When the world beauty did in fact lose the last game, the Türkmen girl called her servant, Mehmet Ağa. They tied the hands of the world beauty and put her in a wooden cage.

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The Türkmen girl then said, "Follow me, Mehmet Ağa!" She descended into the basement, and there they saw a great many strong young men waiting there, each with his hands tied together. The Türkmen girl freed each of these men by cutting the ropes that bound them. As she did so, she said to each, "Go home to your wife!" When she found her husband curled up in a corner with his hands tied together, she freed him too and said to him, "Return to your home." She did not, however, let her husband recognize her.

The Türkmen girl then loaded the cage containing the world beauty on one side of Mehmet Ağa's horse and a saddle pad¹² on the other side for Mehmet Ağa to sit upon. Then she mounted her own horse and led their way back to İstanbul, arriving there two days before her husband did. She had the world beauty bathed and dressed in clean clothes and confined in one of the inner rooms of their home. She ordered musicians and singers to prepare to

¹²The narrator here uses the dialect word tembeliti, which he mispronounces tembelit.

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perform a Mevlüt¹³ service, and she invited a number of ağas and beys¹⁴ to attend this event. She intended to have her husband sleep that night in the bridal chamber with the world beauty.

Advance notice of her husband's approach to İstanbul was brought to the Türkmen girl by several different messengers. When her husband arrived home, she was very hospitable to him and pretended great concern about welfare. "Oh-h-h-h, my husband, where have you been? You have been away for such a long time!"

Her husband answered, "You know how the business of trade can go. This or that can happen at one place, something else can occur at another place." With such empty and meaningless words he made excuses for his absence.

¹³A cantata recounting the birth and life of Mohammed. It was written in 1409 by Süleyman Çelebi of Bursa. It is said by some to be the most important piece of religious music produced in Turkey. It is usually used as a requiem or as a memorial service. There is no rationale for its appearance in this tale.

¹⁴An aristocratic title of pre-Republican times, bey is roughly equivalent to the English lord or baron. Beys were once administrators of sections of the Ottoman Empire. There are no beys today, but bey is used as a mild honorific or as a term of respect or flattery. It follows the male given name: Hasan Bey or Ahmet Bey.

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Her husband was surprised to see so many guests and he wondered why they were there. Some of the guests at the Mevlüt and at the dinner that followed asked the Türkmen girl, "What is the occasion for all of this festivity?"

The Türkmen girl answered, "By the will of God there is a very beautiful woman in that room over there with whom my husband has fallen in love. I went and captured her and brought her here. I shall have her placed in a bridal chamber with my husband tonight. That is the reason for this celebration."¹⁵

¹⁵ Although not badly narrated, this tale is a parade of illogical behavior and unlikely events. See commentary on this tale in Notes, Vol. X.